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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000425

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TAGS: PREL PHUM PINR PGOV FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI CABINET FRICTIONS; QARASE TRAVEL STYMIED;
TAMING THE GCC; CLEAN-UP DOUBLE STANDARDS; SOMARE ON FIJI;
PIF-FIJI WORKING GROUP LOSING MOMENTUM

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Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) Commodore Bainimarama's interim Cabinet is developing fractures. Deposed PM Qarase's plan to travel to Suva this week was derailed. Qarase alleges a military threat to kill him on arrival and a military order to Air Fiji not to board him. Interim government (IG) efforts to tame the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) continue. Bainimarama rejected a high chief's public plea for IG reconciliation. Some observers believe the exercise was a prelude to ethnic-Fijian action against Bainimarama. The case of Nasir Ali illustrates the IG clean-up campaign's double standards. Recent events raise concerns about Fiji's Court of Appeals. A media report suggests PNG PM Somare may be softening his view of how the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) should relate to the Fiji situation. The PIF-Fiji Working Group appears to be losing momentum. End summary.

Fractures coming in interim Cabinet?

12. (C) We hear from seemingly reliable sources that, as expected, fractures are developing within the interim cabinet. Interim PM Bainimarama is reportedly unhappy with interim Finance Minister Chaudhry, interim Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum, and interim Labor/Tourism Minister Rounds-Ganilau. Chaudhry and his Fiji Labor Party colleagues are seen as playing political games rather than focusing on "moving the country forward." Sayed-Khaiyum is seen as complicating the IG's legal problems. Sayed-Khaiyum has taken quite a low profile in recent weeks, after taking a lead public role in the months after the coup. Rounds-Ganilau appeared not to be a "team player" during the recent strikes. Comment: Elements in the ethnic-Fijian community have accused Bainimarama of ceding IG decision-making to ethnic-Indians like Chaudhry and Sayed-Khaiyum. Our impression is that the military council remains in control, but Bainimarama may feel pressure to prove he, not Chaudhry, is in charge.

Qarase alleges RFMF threat

13. (U) Deposed PM Qarase, who has been exiled on his home island in the Lau Group since the December coup, announced his intention to fly to Suva on Friday, 8/31, to help prepare his court case against the IG, reunite with his family, and conduct personal business. Interim Chief Justice Gates ruled some weeks ago that Qarase has a right to travel to attend

court. The military (RFMF) signaled it would not object, suggesting Qarase is now irrelevant. But yesterday (8/28) Qarase reportedly received a phone call threatening his life if he returns to Suva. The caller claimed to be military. Also Air Fiji, the only airline servicing Lau, received an order, purportedly from the RFMF, not to board Qarase. An RFMF spokesman denied any military threat to Qarase or order to Air Fiji. Qarase has postponed his travel plans and has asked associates to see about transporting him by ship.

Co-opting the GCC?

14. (C) On 8/24, President Iloilo issued a decree restructuring the membership of the GCC. The decree drops a few members -- the President, VP, PM, and "life members" (i.e., former PM Rabuka) -- and adds six "co-opted" members. It is not clear yet what "co-opted" means. The big change, though, is in who selects. The 14 provinces are still to provide 3 members each, but rather than the provincial councils selecting them, the Minister for Fijian Affairs is to choose. That, if implemented, would truly "co-opt" the GCC from being an independent institution tasked under the Constitution to protect ethnic-Fijian core interests into a group hand-picked by the IG. GCC leaders who were deposed by the IG in April have re-instituted a lawsuit challenging IG authority to institute changes. In the meantime, an IG-initiated review team has begun consultations within the chiefly system on reforms. Comment: the high chiefs who have dominated the GCC in the past will not be pleased by the latest developments.

Chiefly reconciliation plea or call to arms?

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15. (C) The high chief of Naitasiri Province took out full-page ads (English and Fijian) in the 8/26 Sunday Times newspaper asking the interim PM to engage in national reconciliation. The chief proposed that, given Fiji's current economic hardship, increased racial hatred, and unending political instability, Bainimarama and the IG should accept an amnesty for coup perpetrators, elections by late 2008, demilitarization of government, and an end to "coup culture." The chief said, "Nothing that this regime undertakes will ever be legal and the regime cannot force its will upon the people." Bainimarama firmly rejected the proposal, saying it was "inciteful." He noted the military's belief that the chief was behind a military mutiny in November 2000 that nearly took Bainimarama's life. The chief was convicted of treason and served nearly three years in prison before being freed two months ago pending a new trial.

Comment: some suggest the ad was intended to set the stage for action by ethnic-Fijian leaders against the IG: make a "good faith" offer; see it rejected out of hand; force the issue.

An odd way to combat corruption

16. (U) Shortly after the December coup, Commodore Bainimarama tapped Nasir Ali, a senior Fiji Police officer, to lead the charge, often very publicly, in IG anti-corruption investigations. With creation of the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) Ali retained the role. Under former Police Commissioner Hughes, Ali had been suspended from investigating an "agriculture scam" from 2000-2001, and there were rumors he had engaged in corrupt practices while heading the Police Credit Union. Bainimarama's first Police Commissioner, Jim Koroi, who later moved to head an internal police anti-corruption unit, resigned from the police last week. Letters he wrote to Bainimarama and to then-RFMF Chief of Staff, now Police Commissioner, Teleni have just become public. Koroi, a straight-shooter, alleged Ali was unprofessional and should in no way be allowed a role in investigating Police Credit Union corruption issues. Last week, Teleni appointed Ali to head the credit union investigation. When asked why, given

Koroi's concerns, Teleni said he trusts the guy.

Concerns about the Court of Appeal

17. (C) Acting Chief Justice Gates announced that three local judges will sit as the Fiji Court of Appeal beginning next week. In the past, most Fiji Court of Appeal judges have come in from Australia and New Zealand; however, the former President of the Court of Appeal, Gordon Ward, and a number of Aussie and Kiwi judges whose terms ended in July reportedly refused to consider extensions, not wanting to take an oath to an illegitimate government. The three local judges chosen are an interesting group. Two received their high-court appointments since the coup, tainting them. One of those and the third judge are retirees, serving only temporarily on the high court. The list of appellate cases to be considered has not yet been revealed. Interestingly, Gordon Ward's Pacific Harbor home burnt to the ground last Saturday night. Ward has been vacationing in Ireland. Results of a police investigation have not yet been revealed, but people are wondering if the fire was pay-back for Ward's opposition to the IG.

Is PNG's Somare changing his line on Fiji?

18. (C) Papua New Guinea PM Somare, PIF Chairman until October, reportedly has informed the media that the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) "would do well not to impose unrealistic political timetables on Fiji." Somare is quoted as saying the region wants Fiji to return to democracy, but that return should be "not temporary but enduring." Somare reportedly argued that the Forum risks undermining its ability to influence the IG if it completely refuses to acknowledge that the IG is in effective control of Fiji. Somare suggested that the Forum "should perhaps seriously cede to the principle of doctrine of necessity and deal with the Fiji Government from within the Forum." Comment: Until now, we had received the impression, including from the PNG High Commissioner in Suva, that Somare was intent to maintain the PIF's firm line on Fiji.

PIF-Fiji Working Group losing momentum

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19. (C) PIF Working Group members tell us the Fiji side's initial willingness to engage on election-planning issues is fading. At a meeting last week, the PIF side raised, yet again, the need to move rapidly to hire a Supervisor of Elections, from overseas if no qualified Fiji citizen applies. The PIF offered to provide very quickly a list of qualified prospects and noted probable donor willingness to help fund the right sort of Supervisor. The Fiji side (PermSecs Chand and Ligairi) acknowledged interest in funding, but then started mumbling about needing to "sort out internal processes" first. The sense was the Fiji side wants to appoint whomever it wants in a time frame that could stretch out. We are told it was not an encouraging meeting.

Comment

110. (C) The rumored IG Cabinet frictions, the alleged effort to keep Qarase exiled, the endeavors to rein in the GCC, and controversy surrounding the Naitasiri chief's reconciliation plea, all could relate to the sense reported reftel that ethnic-Fijian discontent with the IG is undiminished and may even be increasing.

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